

The Great and Terrible: The Emperor's War

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Sequel to, The Hokage Great and Terrible. Ten years after the destruction of Konoha Naruto leads the village of Minato through a time of chaos and division. He hopes for a new age of peace. But a new kind of war is coming. Naruto X Hinata

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The Great and Terrible: The Emperor's War

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A messenger

Author's Note: This story is a sequel to the previous story, The Hokage Great and Terrible. For those of you who have read the previous story this one will be much less dark. It picks up directly where the last one ended. For those of you who have not read it I would strongly suggest that you do. But I will still provide a synopsis just in case. I warn you all now that this is a **very** different AU that has nothing in common with the canon beyond the characters. The previous story was not one of my more popular ones. But the people who did like it seemed to like it a great deal. I hope the people who do read this will enjoy it.

Synopsis: Minato was not the one chosen by Sarutobi to become the Yondaime Hokage. Instead he put his faith in his greatest student, Orochimaru. With his unquestioned genius Orochimaru succeeded in trapping the Kyuubi within a crystal gem granting him access to its unlimited power. With such power at his disposal he began to reshape Konoha into what he believed it should be. Under his leadership Konoha conquered all the ninja lands slaughtering all who opposed them. Konoha became rich and powerful, but also cruel and suspicious. A place where the wrong word to the wrong person could lead to death or worse, a stay in one of the camps. Orochimaru's power over life and death seemed complete.

However aided by dreams from the imprisoned Kyuubi, Minato is given the one way to defeat Orochimaru and end his reign... free the Kyuubi and allow her to destroy Konoha. Horrified by the very thought Minato eventually agrees in order to save his son from being used and twisted by the evil Orochimaru. Before unleashing the Kyuubi he sends Naruto, Hinata, and Haku out of the village.

The story takes place ten years after the destruction of Konoha, in a world filled with chaos and strife. In a small newly founded ninja village called Minato, where Namikaze Naruto is Kage.

"Daddy!"

Naruto woke up as a little five year old girl jumped on top of him. As he came awake he saw his little Hanabi jumping up and down and smiling at him. She had long dark blue hair and the same pale lavender eyes as her mother. In fact she looked almost exactly as her mother had at that age.

"Daddy, mommy is making breakfast. She says it's time for you to get up."

In reply he reached up and began tickling his little girl and she began to howl with laughter. Ah, he loved Sundays with the family.

Hinata came out of the kitchen with large plates filled with food. Eggs, ham, potatoes, bacon, and bread with butter. They all drank fresh milk with their meal. Both his boys dug in and began to devour what had been set in front of them. Both boys were the spitting image of their father with spiky blonde hair and deep blue eyes. Minato was seven and Keitaro was six. They were typical brothers who constantly felt the need to compete with each other.

Minato was excited about entering the ninja academy come the fall. Minato had been lording the fact that he was becoming a, 'real' ninja over his brother. Naruto had seen to it that the academy was a bit different than it had been. The students wouldn't be slaughtering any animals to get used to killing and bloodshed. He had also made sure that the spars and the general atmosphere was less brutal than it had been. Orochimaru had wanted his ninjas to all be hardened killers when they graduated. Naruto wanted them to be strong but also well rounded and capable of independent thought and initiative. He did however maintain the same standards that had been there during his one year. Every student would be expected to have decent taijutsu, code breaking, stealth and infiltration skills. They would also need to be able to perform the basic academy jutsus; henge, transformation, body switch, body flicker, and at least one elemental jutsu in whatever element they happened to be strongest

in. The students also learned how to set traps, detonate explosive tags, walk up trees, and walk on water. They were expected to learn all this within four years, by the time they were twelve. If they had difficulties they could have up to three additional years of remedial training. If they were unable to pass the graduation test after seven years of instruction they would not be recognized as ninja.

His son Minato would be part of one of the academy's larger class; there would be twelve of them. His father had told him that back in his day there was a second test administered by the Jonin instructors. If it was failed the students went back to the academy for another year. Orochimaru had ended that practice; he wanted his ninja in the field not in the classroom. Squads of three were assigned to a Jonin sensei who was required to accept and train them. Being given a squad was considered to be an assignment just like any other. Naruto had decided that there would be no second test by the Jonin. Honestly, he thought it would be pointless. If they could pass the academy graduation test they would become ninjas and receive a hitai-ite.

He wore his around his forehead and Hinata wore hers around her neck. All the ninjas of the village wore one. Originally Naruto and Hinata had decided to stop wearing their old leaf hitai-ites as the reminders were too painful. Haku of course had been stripped of his and had no wish to ever look at the leaf symbol again. That had been fine, until they began recruiting former leaf nins to join their new village. Some of them continued to wear the leaf symbol with great pride. Others had thrown their hitai-ites away and did not want to be reminded of the old village. The issue had caused dissension and hard feelings and so Naruto had finally come up with a solution. All ninjas of the village of Minato wore a hitai-ite with the symbol of a cherry blossom. There were cherry trees throughout the land and so it seemed a fitting symbol of their new village.

As he sat there and ate with his family he thought about some of the changes that he had seen. One change was that he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen an orange or even a bowl of rice.

The local farmland was rich and now that farmers were protected and allowed to work the land in peace there was plenty of food. The problem was that with all the fighting and chaos in the world trade with far off places was next to impossible. Caravans traveling within the territory protected by his village were completely safe. Once they left that protection though they were on their own. The result was they mostly depended on what could be grown and made locally. That wasn't really too much of a problem. Instead of having a meal of fish and rice with a little sake they would have pork or chicken with potatoes and bread with beer.

He looked at the digital clock and smiled. It had taken them awhile but they had finally found enough copper to wire the village for electricity a few years ago. He and Shikamaru had designed some wind mills that would power the local generators. Occasionally on still days he or someone else would have to cast a few wind jutsus, but they had electricity. That and clean running water meant they lived better than 90 percent of the people in the ninja lands did. About the only people who still had those luxuries were the ones living in major cities and a handful of rich lords.

After a very hearty breakfast he played with his children for a couple of hours before deciding to take a little walk around the village.

As he left his estate he looked back at the house with a little bit of pride. It was a large two story building with thirty rooms. It was the largest building in the village. Larger than the Assembly or the, 'Tower.' Most people referred to his home as the Namikaze mansion. Hearing that made him laugh as his current home wasn't a tenth size of the one he'd grown up in. Still, it was very spacious and luxurious. He had designed and built it in a week using hundreds of his clones. He was almost as proud of the beautiful rose garden that Hinata and Ino had created. To him the garden they had created was even more spectacular than the one from the old estate.

As he walked he thought about the things that were different now and the things that were the same. People greeted him and were not afraid to come right up to him to talk. That was certainly different. His father had told him that old Sarutobi had been like that when he was Hokage. Maybe, but all of his memories were of Orochimaru as Hokage, and Orochimaru had **not** been a man of the people. Oh he loved to put on shows for them and he loved to hear their applause. But he never wanted to have to be near them.

He thought about his vast estate and about those of the other clans, that had definitely not changed. Even as he tried to share power among all the people the ninja, and especially the clans, were given favorable treatment. There was really no avoiding that if he wanted to recruit them and keep them.

As he walked along the streets there was no ANBU squad detailed to watch him. There were no ANBU, period. Partially that was because there were just not enough ninja in the village to make an entirely separate organization really necessary. More difficult tasks were simply assigned to the better ninjas. Naruto doubted that he would ever create an ANBU even if the numbers rose enough later. In his eyes every ninja in the village was already part of an elite fighting force. Creating an elite within the elite seemed to be a bad idea to him. He wanted people to feel united not separated.

Then there was the question of money. With a smile he reached in and pulled out gamachan, his frog wallet. He knew the thing looked silly but it had been a long ago gift from his dad and he loved it. He pulled out a thick wad of ryu notes in 50, 100, 500, and 1,000 denominations. Haku was on the 50. A shy looking Hinata was on the 100. He was on the 500 with one of his big cheesy grins. And the 1,000 bore the image of his father. Growing up he had never learned much about economics or given money much of a thought. One of the many lessons he'd learned was that nothing had a set value. Things were only worth what someone would give you for them.

All the old ryu notes became worthless over night. Every individual, 'nation' (read every independent city and every feudal lord with his

own troops) began making their own. The value of these notes varied but one constant was always that they were worth the most in the place where they were printed, a lot less in neighboring lands, and they were nothing but colored paper beyond. His village's money was no different, though as they continued to expand each new village or town that joined them was required to accept the notes at their full value.

Reaching to the bottom of his wallet he pulled out a couple tiny gold coins. Each one had an image of his father on one side and a cherry blossom on the other. Along with the master scroll filled with all the material in his family library his father had given him a ten pound bar of gold and a small pouch filled with diamonds. The bar had long since been melted down and turned into coinage. It had been a huge help at those times when they actually had to go trade for something.

Surprisingly the diamonds had turned out to be the least valuable of his father's gifts. Each one was so precious it was almost impossible to get enough trade goods to make it worth selling. Over the years he had only sold a few of them. He took a number of them and made a magnificent diamond necklace for his wife. The rest remained in the original velvet pouch in a safe at home.

His walk led him to the commons, a public park in the heart of the village. He walked up to a fifteen foot tall bronze statue of a ninja smiling down at him. It was of course the image of his father. He looked at the plaque that was on the statue's pedestal.

Namikaze Minato.

Ninja and hero of the village hidden in the leaves. Beloved father and protector. Namesake and inspiration for the village of Minato. May your love and courage never be forgotten.

He stood there and thought about his father. About everything he owed to him and everything he could never repay. He did this a lot, especially on Sundays. It was his own way of paying respect.

He didn't know how long he stood there before a familiar voice caught his attention.

"Naruto!"

He turned around to see Shikamaru slouching towards him. He had one arm around an eight and a half months pregnant Ino who was waddling along and not looking real happy.

Naruto grinned at them. "Shikamaru, Ino, what are you two doing here?"

"Looking for you obviously!" Ino huffed.

Shikamaru rolled his eyes but was careful to do so where Ino couldn't see. "When Hinata told us you'd gone for a walk I knew you'd be here."

"Well there's no outsmarting you Shikamaru. So why are you looking for me?"

"We want you to marry us tomorrow." Ino said.

Naruto's jaw dropped. "You two have been living together for five years and you want to get married tomorrow?"

Ino frowned at him. "I am *not* having my baby out of wedlock. My daddy and mom would both be rolling in their graves."

Shikamaru shrugged. "The only reason we've waited this long is because neither of us wants to give up our family name. I'm the last Nara and she's the last Yamanaka. It would be a lot easier if we didn't love each other so much." He looked over to her. "You are so troublesome."

She punched his arm. "Jerk! You should be grateful that a woman like me is willing to put up with you."

While rubbing his arm he sent a Naruto a little wink. The two of them were always fighting, but they were never far away from one another.

"All right, so will your baby be a Nara or a Yamanaka?" Naruto asked.

"Neither," Ino replied. "and both. The two of us are forming a new clan, the Narayamanaka clan."

Naruto smiled. "So that's how you solved the problem?"

Shikamaru shrugged. "It seemed like a fair compromise. Normally I would have let her have her way, but I just didn't want to lose the Nara name."

"And you only now thought of using both names?" Naruto teased. "Shikamaru my faith in your genius is deeply shaken."

"I thought of this five years ago." He turned to Ino. "But a certain troublesome woman only agreed to it this morning."

Ino's well thought out answer was to punch him in the arm again. "So Naruto, will you marry us tomorrow?"

Naruto rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Well I don't know, Mondays are usually pretty busy." His smirk disappeared and he backed up a couple of steps as a torrent of killer intent came off of Ino.

Shikamaru was looking at her nervously. "Kage-sama please say yes. I'd hate to have to try and find a replacement for you."

Naruto sent an apologetic look at the angry woman. "I'm very sorry Ino, I was just kidding there. I'd be honored to marry the two of you." To Naruto's relief the killer intent vanished instantly.

"Good! The wedding's going to be at four at our home so you had better be there at least half an hour early. And there will be a lot of pictures so I want you in your kage robes and they had *better* be clean. I also want you to give a little speech at the reception since

my dad won't be there, you know nothing too emotional. Just maybe fifteen minutes about how much the two of us mean to you. Then..."

Naruto stood there listening. Her list of wants was depressingly long. The wedding might be tomorrow, but she'd obviously given a whole lot of thought as to **exactly** how she wanted it to go.

With the exhaustive efforts of Naruto, Shikamaru, Hinata, Tenten, and a great many others the wedding and reception were set up pretty much to Ino's specifications. Naruto even managed to show up with his specially made white Kage's cloak with the orange flames along the bottom. It was a beautiful ceremony in front of a large audience of friends. Chouji got to be best man. They talked about how they wished Asuma had been with them.

The reception was a feast filled with music and free flowing beer. As the adults drank and danced the children ran around playing. Everyone was having a good time.

Until a ninja that had been on patrol arrived shouting for the Kage.

"What is it?" A slightly tipsy Naruto asked.

The ninja bowed to his leader. "Kage-sama, we ran into a foreign ninja who wishes to speak to you."

This was a surprise. Ninjas didn't seek them out that often; normally they had to be recruited. And a foreign ninja? There were only a handful in Minato that had been born outside the old borders of Fire country. This was certainly rare, but not completely unheard of.

"Well send him in." Naruto said.

"Ah, actually Kage-sama she is a kunoichi."

Naruto shrugged. "Fine." The ninja disappeared. Naruto looked to his wife. "Uhm, honey? Could you help me get rid of the beer buzz?"

He didn't want this kunoichi's first impression of him to be that of someone who wasn't quite sober.

Hinata giggled as she nodded. "Of course dear." Performing a simple medical jutsu she neutralized the alcohol in his system.

It seemed like a real waste to be sober after drinking so much damn beer. But Naruto was willing to make the sacrifice.

In short order the two ninjas arrived escorting a stranger.

She had shoulder length auburn hair and was dressed in a loose fitting grey tunic and tan pants. She was looking distinctly nervous as she looked about. She was surrounded by dozens of ninja with their hitai-ites on.

Naruto approached her with a welcoming smile. "Hello, my name is Naruto and I am the Kage of this village."

She focused her attention on him for a moment. "Are all of you ninja?" she asked.

Naruto nodded. "Pretty much, if you've come here to join us you'd be welcomed to."

That seemed to get her focused. "No, I am not here to join you. I am a messenger."

"Well that sounds interesting, but could I know your name first?"

"Of course." She bowed to him. "My name is Matsuri of what was once the land of wind. I am here to deliver a message from the emperor."

That got a chuckle. "Emperor, huh? There are at least two right now, which one are you referring to?"

Her lips twisted down and she spoke with complete sincerity and firmness. "There is only one true emperor! His imperial majesty, Gato

the First!"

The long journey

Naruto stared at her

Naruto stared at her. "Gato the First, huh?" he began to rub the back of his head. "Sorry, I've never heard of him."

Matsuri frowned and looked angry.

"I think I may have." Naruto and everyone else turned their heads towards the newly married Narayamanaka Shikamaru. Since joining the village Shikamaru had gone on a great many trading expeditions, acting as a negotiator as well as guard. Surprisingly enough, with his knowledge and tactical sense he'd proved very good at it. He had done a good bit of traveling and tried to learn as much as possible about new nations.

"I believe he is in control of Wave country." Shikamaru said.

"All of it?" Naruto asked. Wave country was a small land. But the way the world had fractured it would now be considered a massive kingdom. It would certainly be several times larger than the territory under the control of his village.

"That's right," Matsuri spoke up. "However, the land ruled by the emperor is now known as the empire of Gato." She seemed to stand just a little taller.

"Wow, this guy sounds really humble." Naruto smiled. Matsuri did not seem amused.

Hinata gently put a hand on her husband's arm and leaned in to whisper to him. "Naruto-kun, she's come all this way to meet with you. Please be nice and show some respect."

Naruto sighed and nodded. He had plenty of experience dealing with the Assembly and the Council. But he was sadly lacking in

experience dealing with foreign diplomats. But Hinata was right, he needed to be just a bit more formal and behave more like he did with the other leaders of his village. He put on his, 'Kage' face.

He gave her a small apologetic bow. "Sorry, now what can I do for your emperor?"

She nodded, glad that he was at least taking her seriously. "I was sent here to hire all the ninja of this village." She looked around nervously. "Of course I wasn't expecting more than four or five of you at most." There were other ninja villages in the world, but none of them had more than a handful. In all the world she had guessed there might be a hundred ninja left. "How many ninja reside in this village?"

Naruto was about to tell her they had seventy eight ninja not including the academy students.

Hinata jumped in ahead of her husband. "Oh I am sorry, but you can't expect us to share such vital information with you."

Naruto looked to Hinata a bit surprised, but nodded.

"Well, even though there are many more of you than expected my emperor's command remains the same." She reached into a pocket in her cloak and pulled out a small leather pouch and offered it to Naruto. "Please accept this as a small token of the emperor's generosity."

Naruto took the small pouch and opened it idly. What he saw made him gasp. Gold coins! He pulled one out to have a closer look. It looked just a bit bigger and heavier than the ones he was used to. On one side was the visage of a squat middle aged man with the title, 'Emperor Gato the First' written underneath. On the other side was the image of a shark. Naruto didn't like those images, but there was no denying the value of gold. "Just how many are in here?" He asked quietly.

Matsuri gave him a reassuring smile. "One hundred, and should you accept the emperor's offer you will be paid in gold." With that everyone around them began to buzz with excitement.

Naruto really couldn't blame them. Gold had only become even more precious as it was one of the few constants left in a world filled with disorder. The gold coins in his purse were each worth 20,000 in paper currency. And that was a conservative rate of exchange. The pouch in his hand was worth, at the very least, two million ryu.

"Well, I have to admit, it's a damn good gift." Naruto put the one coin back in and tied up the pouch again. "Shikamaru!" He tossed the pouch over to him. Despite his share of beer Shika caught it with ease. "As treasurer you hold on to those, they go into the village treasury." It was important for people to see that the gold belonged to the village and not to him.

He turned back to his guest, now much more interested than he had been just a moment before. The more gold they could bring into the village coffers the better. "Well, while most of our ninja work as the local military protecting our citizens some do still take on missions for paying customers. I am sure we can work something out."

She nodded. "Then you may select up to three representatives to accompany me back to the empire of Gato. There you will be permitted to speak to the emperor himself and negotiate a contract to enter his most noble service."

"And exactly what sort of service does your emperor require?" Naruto asked quietly.

"That is for the emperor alone to speak of." Matsuri replied.

"I see."

"And if it is all right with you. I would like to leave as soon as possible tomorrow morning." Matsuri said.

"Tomorrow?" Naruto asked in surprise. "Wave country is at least a week from here. Wouldn't you at least like to rest for a few days? We have an Inn and you would be welcome to enjoy a few days as our guest."

She shook her head. "I would be happy to accept a room and a meal, but I would still like to leave as early tomorrow as possible. I have many other duties and I need to return to the empire as soon as I can." There was something else that urged her to leave, but she knew better than to reveal it.

"Very well, we'll leave shortly after sunrise." Naruto answered.

"We?" Matsuri questioned.

Naruto nodded. "That's right I'll be one of the three who accompany you." He grinned a bit. "I'm looking forward to meeting this emperor."

Matsuri was escorted to the Inn while Naruto gathered the Council together for an impromptu meeting back in his home. Fortunately, almost the entire Council was present for the reception and thanks to Hinata they were soon all sober.

This was not the first time he had ever called a meeting of the Council in his dining room. Minato was the size of a small town and there was a familiarity between all of them. So after Hinata had put their kids to bed she had gotten them all some milk and then stood beside her husband. Technically she had no right to attend a meeting of the council, but they were all friends and no one was going to try and make it an issue.

Naruto looked at the seven members of the Council. There was Neji, head of the Hyuga clan. One of the tiny bright spots that had come of Konoha's end was the end of the caged bird seal and the split within Hyuga. Neji wore the caged seal, but no one else ever would. There was Chouji, head of the Akimichi clan munching on some wedding

cake. There was a very unhappy Ino and a bored looking Shikamaru. There was Inuzuka Hana, matriarch of the Inuzuka clan. She had married and her ninja husband had agreed to change his name to preserve that of her clan. There was Haku, who along with him and Hinata were the original founders of the village. The three of them were also the only ones to know a terrible secret that could easily tear the village apart. And at the end of the table was the most senior ninja in the village.

"Yosh!" Guy said with his usual enthusiasm. "Kage-sama who will be going on this mission?"

Naruto shut his eyes, knowing he was going to get an argument. "Me, Shikamaru, and Neji will go. As usual, you Haku will be in charge in my absence."

Haku nodded. He was absolutely devoted to Naruto for saving his life. And would do anything for him or for his family.

"What?!" Ino got to her feet and screeched. Naruto had known this was coming. "You want to take Shika from me the day after we get married? You want him to miss the birth of our child?"

"I'm sorry Ino, I don't want to do this but the needs of the village have to come first. I am going to need Shikamaru's intelligence and negotiating skills with me to get us the best contract possible. I don't want to be away from my family for weeks either." He reached out and gently took his wife's hand. "But I have to go. For something this important I have to be there to make the final decision."

Ino inhaled to start shouting when she felt Shikamaru's soothing touch on her arm. "Ino," He said quietly. "Don't yell at Naruto for doing what you know he has to. I don't want to leave; I know it will be troublesome. But I'll be back with presents for you and the baby."

She looked at him and was clearly struggling not to cry. "I don't want presents! I want you there with me. I can't do this alone."

"You won't be alone Ino-chan," Chouji spoke up. "I'll be there with you. I have two of my own so I know what to expect."

"I'll be there too Ino-chan," Hinata said with a warm smile. "You won't be alone."

Shikamaru stood up and wrapped his arms around his wife. "You know that I have to go." He spoke to her with a tenderness usually reserved for when they were alone. "But I'll be back as soon as I can and I'll be thinking of you the whole time."

She pressed her head against his neck and sobbed a bit, but did not argue any further.

After that the rest of the meeting went fairly smoothly.

As was her habit Matsuri had eaten and was ready to travel well before the sun had risen. She had been informed that she would meet with the Kage and his party at the commons. Following a guide she made her way there in the predawn. Once there she saw the area was dominated by a large bronze statue. Naturally curious she went over to it and as the sky lightened read the plaque.

Finding out who it was she took a step back and carefully looked around. She had the entire park to herself. With a grim smile she spat onto the statue.

"When will you be back daddy?" Hanabi asked him.

He smiled and gave his little girl a kiss on the cheek. "Probably not for at least a couple weeks, but more likely three or longer."

She looked up at him with those big lavender eyes. "I'm going to miss you daddy."

He hugged his little girl and gave her some more kisses. "I'll miss you too honey."

"Are you going to be fighting any bandits or enemy ninja?" His son Minato asked eagerly. Both his boys were convinced their father was invincible.

Naruto laughed a bit. Like most boys around that age his sons thought fighting enemies to be a wonderful and glorious thing. He had tried telling them it wasn't. They still believed the stories though. Well they would learn better one day. "Sorry kids, but there shouldn't be any of that. This should be a nice peaceful mission."

Both boys were terribly disappointed to hear that.

"Come on everyone let's eat before your father has to go." Hinata said in a cheerful voice. Her words and her demeanor let the children know that this was just an ordinary day and that dad would be home soon.

When breakfast was done though she followed her husband out the door for a bit. As soon as the door was shut and the children were no longer watching she squeezed on tight to him. She was five months pregnant so she was a bit awkward getting close enough to really hug him tight.

"I hate it when you leave." Hinata cried quietly so that only he could hear it. "I don't want you to go."

He put his arms around her. "Hinata-chan you know I have to do this." He said gently.

"I know," she nodded and looked lovingly into his blue eyes. "But I still hate it."

He gave her a long sweet kiss goodbye, and then regretfully left the warmth of her arms.

When they met at the commons Matsuri was there and eager to go.
"So can we go now?"

"In a minute." Naruto replied. He walked over about twenty feet to the large statue and stood there just looking at it for a moment.

"What is he doing?" Matsuri asked in an annoyed tone.

"He is honoring the will of fire by remembering his ancestor." Neji spoke proudly.

Matsuri's head snapped around. "His ancestor?"

"Yeah," Shikamaru answered lazily. "Naruto's clan name is Namikaze. He is the only son of Konoha's Yellow Flash."

"I see." Matsuri replied in an indifferent voice.

Neji was a master of reading body language. He noticed the way she stiffened and would have bet that had his byakugan been active he would have seen a sudden rise in her heartbeat. *Interesting, why such a strong reaction?* Neji of course gave away no hint that he had noticed anything.

Before long Naruto had rejoined them. He had on the same eager smile he always had when he was about to go on a mission. "Are you ready to go?"

Matsuri quickly nodded. "Yes, let's go."

The four of them departed and began the long journey to the coast.

Meeting the emperor

A week was a long time to be on the road. At Matsuri's request they avoided stopping in towns and villages. Naruto and the others had no objection. They were all experts at hunting and fishing and could always find a source of clean water. After traveling most of the day they would set up a base camp, find food and water, eat, and then do a little light training before going to sleep. When the three of them trained Matsuri gave them room and kept a discreet eye on them. The boys had agreed that they would not reveal anything beyond the most basic of their skills to her. No byakugan, no shadow possession, no rasengan or hiraishin. Only the basics.

On the third night Naruto and Neji decided to have a friendly little spar. In the middle of it Neji threw a couple shuriken. Rather than dodge as usual Naruto performed a simple substitution. The shuriken struck an old log as Naruto appeared somewhere else.

"What was that?!"

Matsuri's excited shout brought the two combatants to a halt. It even woke up a napping Shikamaru.

"What?" Naruto asked, not knowing what she was referring to.

Matsuri began pointing at the log. "That! What was that?"

"A substitution." He replied calmly. He saw the confused look on her face. "It's a jutsu." He clarified.

"Oh." She replied, obviously looking a little embarrassed.

Naruto looked at her for a bit. "Do you know any jutsus?" He asked as politely as he could.

"I know the henge." She snapped. She immediately performed it, becoming a mirror image of Naruto.

Shrugging Naruto performed one as well and became Matsuri.
"Know any others?" He asked with a perfect imitation of her voice.

Matsuri turned back into herself. "No."

Neji lifted a single eyebrow. "You look to be close to our age, why do you not know more?"

"Maybe because I never had a sensei!" She snapped back angrily. "I got out of Wind country with my grandmother about half a step ahead of Konoha's army." She turned deliberately towards Naruto. "Everyone who might have been my teacher is dead. I've learned taijutsu and weapons, but there was no one to teach me about jutsus." She began to stomp away.

Naruto transformed back into himself. "Would you like me to teach you substitution?"

Matsuri stopped. She looked back over to him. He seemed to be serious. "Why would you teach it to me?"

He smiled. "Because friends should try to help each other."

The son of the man who had butchered her whole country wanted to be friends with her. She wasn't sure if she wanted to laugh or cry. "We are not friends. Understand this, Namikaze Naruto, only son of the Yellow Flash; I do this only because it is the will of my lord." With that she walked away and headed for her tent.

Shikamaru yawned and walked over to his two friends. "Well that was troublesome."

"Why did you offer to teach her the substitution jutsu? She is not a member of the village." Neji asked.

"It's an academy level jutsu, it's not like I'm offering to teach her kage bushin or rasengan." Naruto replied.

"Even so," Neji continued. "Why offer her any sort of aid?"

Naruto shrugged a bit. "It won't make her dangerous to us, and I was sort of hoping it might help us become friends."

"Yeah, good luck with that Naruto." Shikamaru said. "She's not exactly friendly."

"She is from Wind country." Naruto said. "And I am who I am."

None of them really wanted to add anything to that.

Naruto lay in his tent wide awake.

Total Pacification. The words did not seem ominous. Not unless you knew what they meant. They were the code words for genocide. Fourteen years ago the Yondaime Hokage Orochimaru had grown weary of the unending resistance of Wind country. They had been conquered, Suna had been turned to ashes and all but a handful of her ninja slaughtered. Yet even against the might of Konoha the people of Wind country had continued to resist, waging an exhausting guerilla campaign. Sick of the drain on his forces Orochimaru had decided to seal the borders and then systematically kill **everyone**. Civilian, guerilla, old, young, innocent, guilty, they were put to the sword and buried in pits all across that land. And to accomplish this task the Hokage had chosen his most efficient servant, Namikaze Minato.

Naruto had graduated early from the academy and had been sent to Wind country in time for the last couple months of the operation. His father had kept him away from the worst of it, but Naruto saw enough to understand what was happening. His father was a good man. He had been a hero to the village of Konoha second only to Orochimaru. His father had been a man of courage and of honor. But Naruto could not deny that he had committed acts of evil under Orochimaru's name. Naruto had done so as well. In Wind, Grass, Waterfall, Rain, and Cloud he had killed innocent people while obeying the orders of his Hokage. All the ninjas of his village had, with the sole exception of Hinata. Because of her unique position as

Hyuga heir she had been deliberately sheltered from the brutal realities of being a Leaf nin. His father was more famous (or more infamous) but the truth was that save for Hinata they were all guilty.

Naruto did not try to deny the truth. Yet at the same time he did not think of himself as guilty. He did not think of his fellow ninjas as guilty. He did not think of his father as anything but a good man. So just how was he supposed to answer someone like Matsuri? The only excuse he had was that he had been obeying the orders of his Hokage. It was the truth, but even to his own ears it did not sound like much.

There was of course an ultimate irony to all of this. That being that Namikaze Minato had been the one to bring Orochimaru's reign to its fiery conclusion. The world believed that Konoha had been destroyed because Orochimaru had somehow lost control of the Kyuubi while trying to perform one of his famous displays to impress the masses. Those who hated Konoha saw the hand of Kami punishing the man for his arrogance and cruelty. Those who had been loyal to Konoha saw it as a horrible tragedy. But all agreed that Orochimaru had been to blame. They were all wrong.

His father had written him a letter confessing everything. Minato had taken the Kyuubi's knowledge and released it. And he had done it to save his son. Naruto could not think of that without feeling an ache in his chest. His father had broken his oaths and destroyed his own village out of love for him.

That was the truth. If Matsuri had known it maybe she would have been a bit more forgiving. But she would never know. Naruto had understood that what his father had done would make him a hero to some and a villain to others. When he read out the letter Hinata had cried because her entire family, save for Neji, had died. Haku had smiled and declared Minato a true hero. There were people in his village who refused to speak Orochimaru's name and considered his fate justice. There were others who proudly proclaimed Orochimaru a great man and mourned him even now. If the truth were ever

known it would rip the village of Minato apart. Naruto had burned the letter and he, Hinata, and Haku had sworn to never speak of it.

Naruto shut his eyes and tried to sleep.

On their long journey Naruto tried to talk to Matsuri.

"You know my village has a library with hundreds of jutsus in it. Any ninja who joins the village is given free access to that information. There would also be plenty of ninjas who could help you learn them, myself included."

Matsuri looked at him carefully. "Are you trying to make up for past crimes?"

"No." Naruto said flatly. "What I did when I was a leaf nin was my duty, nothing more, nothing less."

Matsuri sent him a frosty smile. "Just following orders, huh?"

Naruto frowned but nodded. "Yes."

"Is that how you sleep at night?" She asked. "Telling yourself that none of it was your fault. That you had to obey."

"I sleep just fine at night." Naruto lied.

"Tell me something, have you been to Wind country anytime in the last ten years?"

"No."

"Well don't worry you haven't missed anything. The cities are all still tombs and the whole place is still empty except for a handful of shepherds and traders. The dead are all still dead."

There was a long drawn out silence between them.

"I'm sorry." Naruto said quietly.

"I don't want your apologies!" Matsuri said angrily. "And I don't want your help and I sure as hell don't want your friendship or the friendship of **any** leaf nin."

"Well then you're in luck." Naruto said sharply. "Because there are no more leaf nins. There is no Konoha, no Hokage, no Fire country, that is all gone now."

"Just like the people who used to live in Wind country. Do you expect me to just forget?"

Naruto shook his head. "No, just as I will never forget my father or my home. But there is nothing that I can do about the past. Whatever I say or do the dead remain dead. All I can do now is try to make the world that is a better place and to learn from the past."

"That won't ever make me forgive or forget. When I was in your village I felt like I was in hell surrounded by demons wearing shiny hitai-ites. Whatever you do I will never forgive any of you."

"Then why are we here right now?" Naruto asked.

"Because it is my lord's will. I endure your presence because he commands it. That doesn't mean I want to get to know you or spend one more second with you than I need to." She stomped away.

Naruto stood there and watched her go. There were just some battles you were just never going to win.

After seven days they finally arrived at the coast. Matsuri led them up a wide road to a large fortress made of earth and wood. Naruto had a good eye for construction and he guessed the place had not been there for more than six months or so. Matsuri entered the fortress alone while the three of them waited outside.

"Pretty big fort to be just sitting here by the water's edge." Naruto commented.

Shikamaru nodded. "It must be guarding the bridge."

Directly behind the fortress was a large stone bridge that back out of sight over the ocean.

"Someone must think this bridge is worth protecting." Shikamaru said.

After a few minutes Matsuri came out of the fort's gates and called them to enter. Inside they spotted a few hundred soldiers all wearing identical grey tunics and most of them carrying pikes or bows. They were all looking towards them with fear.

They know we're ninja and they're scared of us. Naruto thought.

Running along the bridge they came to a spot near the end where the stone gave way to wood for a short section perhaps a quarter mile long. The difference was as noticeable as a scar on someone's face.

"Was this bridge damaged in a storm?" Naruto asked.

"No," Matsuri answered indifferently. "The bridge has been incomplete since before the end of the empire of Konoha. It was only finished less than a year ago."

"Why would you go to the trouble of building so much of a bridge and leave it unfinished?"

"The architect who was working on it had an accident." Matsuri said. "After that the local lords decided it was better to rely on shipping rather than on the bridge."

Naruto thought that rather odd given how much had been built but didn't bother to ask any more about it.

At the end of the bridge was a small village. The people there looked rather shabby and on the thin side. In fact the only ones who looked well fed were the soldiers who were marching or training in the village. Another thing that stood out were the banners that seemed to be everywhere. They were blue with the white outlines of a shark. Naruto recognized it as the same symbol from the coins Matsuri had given him.

"There seem to be a great many soldiers here." Neji commented.

"Yeah, they would be pretty hard to miss." Shikamaru commented.
"It's also pretty hard to miss the way they're looking at us." Everyone who looked their way looked scared, even the soldiers.

Naruto had done a lot of traveling both before and after founding his new village. He had seen these looks before, but not for more than a decade. This was how people in the occupied lands had looked at him when he was still a Leaf nin. It was a look that said there were wolves loose and that the wolves were about to turn on them.

"How many soldiers are there in this village?" Naruto asked.

Matsuri gave him a sarcastic grin. "Oh I am sorry, but you can't expect me to share such vital information with you."

"Of course." Naruto gave Neji a glance. Neji understood and quietly activated his byakugan. He kept it active for a minute as he did a rough estimate of all the soldiers within a two mile radius. The he deactivated and mouthed the words, 'five thousand.'

Naruto nodded and they continued to follow Matsuri. In the world they lived in battles were often fought with each side having only a few hundred men. Only city states or very wealthy nobles could raise armies of a few thousand. That meant this emperor had a very large military at his disposal. Somehow Naruto was not surprised.

A few miles past the village they came to a large stone palace with a central pagoda three stories high with wide slanted roofs. The palace itself was surrounded by a twenty foot high outer wall and moat. It was an impressive building and it was the center of a huge army camp filled with tents and marching soldiers and shark pennants blowing in the wind.

"If there are less than ten thousand soldiers here then I am a kunoichi." Neji said quietly.

"Man I can already tell this is going to be troublesome." Shikamaru complained.

Naruto said nothing.

The interior of the palace was a stark contrast from what they had seen in the village. The floors were covered with thick rugs and the walls had paintings and silk drapes. Electric light filled the palace and all about them were items of gold and silver. Matsuri led them to a large hall just outside the throne room and then left them. Naruto didn't think it a coincidence that guards began to drift into the hall by ones and twos until there were twenty of them. Unlike the common soldiers the palace guard had blue uniforms and they all wore armor made of sheets of plate mail. But that was not the most interesting thing about them.

"Naruto," Neji said in a whisper. "These men, they can mold chakra."

"I know," Naruto answered in an undertone. "They're all ninja."

The throne room doors opened and another palace guardsman stepped out. He was perhaps six feet tall and as bald as an egg. On his back he wore a large battle axe. "I am captain Shimizu; his imperial majesty will grant you an audience. Come."

Naruto nodded and led his ninja into a vast throne room with an arched ceiling. The space was filled with more shark pennants and with paintings and statues of the short stumpy man who had to be the emperor. Before them was a marble dais with a single throne simply covered in gold and purple. Naruto's opinion was that it was gaudy as all hell. Back in the village of Minato he didn't have a throne room or a throne or a bunch of statues that looked like him. Naruto met people in an office sitting behind a desk.

Horns sounded. (Yes, actual horns.) Shimizu and the other guards immediately dropped to both knees. Shimizu glared at the three visitors. "Fall to your knees in the imperial presence!"

"No!" Naruto answered sharply. "We are free men and we kneel to no one." His father had told him stories of how Orochimaru had demanded that people prostrate themselves before meeting him. So far as Naruto was concerned that would **never** happen again.

"You dare defy the will of the emperor?" Shimizu demanded.

"We aren't his subjects and we never will be. Even if we enter his employ we will not kneel. The most we will ever do is bow to show him our respect. But we will never kneel and show him submission."

His words clearly angered Shimizu but Naruto did not care.

"Respect is enough for right now." A voice called from behind the throne. A short man who was a copy of the paintings and statues appeared and mounted the steps towards his throne. When he seated himself he told his guards that they could stand. The man was wearing a large black cylinder of a hat and a flowing robe of gold and blue. Matsuri was nowhere to be seen.

Naruto and the others gave the man a deep and respectful bow. "Emperor-san," Naruto spoke. "I am Namikaze Naruto, the Kage of the village of Minato. These are my fellow ninja and also clan heads and members of the High Council Hyuga Neji and Narayamanaka

Shikamaru. We have come here in answer to the invitation extended to us to inquire what services we may perform for you."

Gato crossed his hands in front of his face. His eyes were hidden behind small sunglasses. "Are you *really* Namikaze Naruto, the Second Flash of Konoha?"

From the corner of his eye Naruto could see some of the guards looking rather nervous. It had been a very long time since anyone had called him that. But for those who remembered the Second Flash had once been considered one of the world's most powerful ninja. "I am."

Gato smiled a bit. "Can you prove it?"

Naruto nodded. "I can if you will allow me to perform a jutsu." The guards seemed to become more nervous.

"Go right ahead." Gato replied.

Naruto held out his palm and a mass of swirling chakra came into being. "This is the rasengan. It is a special attack jutsu created by my father. Besides myself and my father the only other people ever taught it were Jiraiya and Kakashi. I am the only person in the world who now knows it. Does this satisfy you?"

Gato nodded. "It does, I used to spend time in Konoha and I'd heard of the rasengan." Gato's smile widened. "Oh, to have the Second Flash serving me! It looks like things are going my way."

Naruto allowed the chakra in his palm to dissipate. "I take it then that you wish to employ us."

"Bet your sweet ass I do." He might be an emperor but he still talked like a money hungry thug. "I'll pay you two hundred and fifty gold coins a month and I'll pay each of your men fifty. I'll also throw in bonuses for special missions. What do you say?"

For assignments like this the pay was usually split 50 / 50 between the ninja and the village. Naruto would donate all his pay to the village. That meant the village could make 300 gold coins each month. Or the equivalent of six million ryu. That was too much income to turn down.

"I am afraid that's not enough for the Second Flash." Shikamaru spoke up. "I am afraid you will have to pay him five hundred a month and we'll each need a hundred."

Naruto had to struggle to keep his face blank. Gato was already offering them a fortune of their services. To demand double seemed crazy.

"Fine," Gato answered without batting an eye. "But you begin immediately, starting tomorrow."

Naruto looked to Shikamaru with genuine awe. Shikamaru just shrugged as if to say, 'yeah, I'm a genius but it's troublesome.'

Naruto looked back at the emperor. "Very well emperor-san, what duties do you require of us?"

Gato's smile got wider. "I have a whole lot of things in mind for you. But to start with I want some assassinations."

Assassins

Naruto stood at the very base of the sea cliff. Rather than his usual clothing he had on black ninja gear. A hood covered up his blonde hair while a simple mask (not unlike Kakashi's) covered his face except for his eyes. It was three in the morning, the perfect time. Even with a half moon providing light he was sure he would remain unseen. He took a moment to look up at the castle that had been built on the edge of the cliff. It had high stone walls and with its position would seem impregnable. And it probably was, to an army or to an ordinary assassin. But no fortification, no matter how well designed, could defeat a properly trained ninja.

Leaping up from the sea Naruto's feet made contact with the sheer side of the cliff. He ran straight up jumping over boulders and small ledges. When he reached the ground level of the castle itself he momentarily halted. Pulling out his binoculars he carefully scanned the perimeter of the castle wall. He saw one, two, three wearily slouching about on patrol. He nodded; it was just like last night's recon. The guards had taken no special precautions and these few were tired and bored. Truthfully if they had taken special precautions it would not have stopped him from completing his mission. The only things that could stop a ninja on a mission like this would be other ninjas or possibly some trap jutsus. Unfortunately for Lord Domeki he had only ordinary guards to rely on.

He waited for one of the guards to turn the other way. He raced up the side of the castle wall. He knew where Lord Domeki slept and quickly got to that window. He was a little surprised to find it unlocked. Naruto frowned just on general principle, leaders should take security seriously. Domeki obviously felt himself to be completely safe. He opened the window and entered silently.

The royal apartments consisted of several rooms and were kind of nice. Certainly there were plenty of expensive furnishings everywhere. Certainly much nicer than the poverty his serfs lived in.

Domeki seemed to be about the typical feudal lord. He lived a good life thanks to the labors of his subjects. So long as they provided him what he needed he didn't seem to worry too much about them. That seemed to be the way most of the world worked these days.

Certainly emperor Gato didn't seem to lose much sleep over his own people's misery. But if you were going to enjoy the benefits of being lord of the land you had to take the bad along with the good. And for Domeki the bad was going to be as bad as it could be.

In short order Naruto found the bedroom. Domeki was a paunchy man in his late fifties. Lying next to him in his bed was a very pretty young girl. If she were older than 16 he would have been amazed. Naruto was hardly shocked by the sight. No doubt the girl was from the village and Domeki had simply decided he wanted her. He probably would have sent her home eventually, maybe even with a little bit of money as a thank you. This was one of the problems with the world now, too many small men who had no one to fear or answer to. On his land a feudal lord was a like a king. He was above the law and could do anything without shame or fear. To Naruto's mind all these men were small pale imitations of Orochimaru. Their crimes and their wickedness did not compare just as their power did not. But like Orochimaru they felt themselves entitled to do as they pleased. Naruto was thinking how Gato was no better. Gato was actually far worse, he had more power and would be acquiring far more soon. Yes, Gato was worse than Domeki. The difference was Gato was the client and Domeki the target.

Naruto slapped down his right hand over the man's mouth. His eyes opened immediately with a look of sheer horror. Naruto slammed one of his tri kunai into one of those eyes. Domeki shook just a bit and was then still, there was only a little blood. Through it all the girl in the bed slept peacefully, had she woken up Naruto would not have bothered with her. He pulled his tri kunai out and cleaned it off. He then tossed a single playing card onto the bed. One side had the seven of diamonds, the other a symbol of a shark. Gato was a bit of an egomaniac and wanted to make sure people knew who was

responsible. With that his mission was complete. He disappeared in a flash of yellow.

The next instant he appeared again in his room in Gato's palace. He, Neji, and Shikamaru were all being housed and fed in the palace. As was his habit, he did a quick search to make sure his room was secure. Once he was satisfied he got ready for bed. He would sleep well. He had done many things he regretted in his life. But assassinating an enemy lord was not one of them. So far as he was concerned any political or military leader was a legitimate target. Certainly as a Kage he knew he was one.

As for the act of killing itself Naruto did not think twice about it. When everything else was stripped away the fact was that ninja were trained to be two things, spies and assassins. He was a ninja, so by definition he was a spy and an assassin. He felt guilt only when he thought the killing was unnecessary. He put his head on the pillow and closed his eyes. He was soon in a deep peaceful sleep.

The door lock gave a slight click as it was picked. The door to his room opened and closed silently. A figure dressed in the same sort of black ninja gear moved slowly and carefully across the room. There sprawled across the bed was a peacefully sleeping Naruto. Deliberately and warily the ninja approached the bed. A kunai was pulled out.

"What are you doing?" A calm voice asked from right behind the intruder.

The ninja spun a round to suddenly face Naruto. The ninja attempted a stab but it was easily blocked. A hard punch straight into the ninja's face ended the encounter with a knock out.

She felt a slap across her face. "Wake up!" An angry voice demanded.

She heard someone sigh. "That's enough Neji." She recognized it as Naruto's voice. As she opened her eyes she realized she was tied to a chair and gagged. She also saw a furious Neji standing in front of her with Shikamaru and Naruto.

Neji sent Naruto an unhappy look. "You really are much too merciful at times."

"Maybe," Naruto muttered. "But once you kill someone you can't take it back." He leaned into Matsuri's face. "I am going to take off the gag so we can ask you some questions. If you start screaming I'll knock you out again. If anyone comes here to check I'll cut your throat and tell them you tried to kill me, that's what Neji thinks I should do, so I don't give me a reason. Do you understand?"

Matsuri glared at him but nodded. He untied her gag. "Go ahead and kill me," she said defiantly. "I won't tell you anything and I won't beg so you may as well get it over with."

"Troublesome," Shikamaru muttered.

Neji sneered but kept his peace.

Naruto just looked at her. "Do you *want* to die?"

In her bonds she managed to shrug. "Not really, but I knew when I decided on this I probably would."

"Did someone send you or were you acting on your own?" Naruto asked.

She smiled proudly. "I did it on my own. No one needed to send me to kill you."

"Well I don't suppose I need to ask why. But when we were traveling you seemed awfully worried about your emperor. What would Gato think about your killing one of his prized employees?"

"That's emperor Gato!" She snapped. "I hoped that the emperor would understand why it would be best for you to die. He knew nothing of what I wanted to do."

"And why would it?" Naruto asked quietly.

"You know why! You know what your father did!"

"And so you wish for Naruto to pay for his father's sins?" Neji asked condescendingly.

"It's easy for you to talk that way!" Matsuri shot back. "You didn't lose everything and everyone!"

"Yes I did!" Neji spoke angrily. "I lost my home, I lost my father, and my whole family except for my cousin. Everyone here has suffered great loss! Don't think you're special or unique because of that."

"Neji," Naruto spoke calmly and the man calmed himself. Naruto looked at Matsuri again. "I am sorry for what happened to your family and your people. Whether you believe it or not I am. But I can't change what happened, and I'm not willing to die just to soothe your pain some." Matsuri sent him a wave of killer intent. "I am not your enemy, not unless you choose to make me one. And I have no wish to kill you." He took his kunai out and sliced through the rope holding her. "But if you attack me or either of my friends again you will die. Now go."

She remained in the chair and stared at him. "You're going to just let me go?" She looked at him suspiciously. "Why?"

"Because I don't have a contract on you and I don't consider you my enemy." Naruto said. He tried to get through to her. "I can't change the past Matsuri. All I can effect is the present and the future. If you can leave the past behind I can see no reason why we need to fight each other. But if you refuse to let go of your hate then I *will* kill you. Now get out of here before I change my mind."

She got slowly up to her feet and quickly fled.

As soon as she was gone Neji frowned at his leader again. "You really are too soft."

"I know," Naruto muttered. "So what did your byakugan reveal? Was she telling the truth?"

"About this being her idea, yes. But she lied when she said that Gato didn't know about this."

"Well that's wonderful." Naruto looked to Shikamaru. "Shika what do you think? Is Gato planning to betray us?"

Shikamaru frowned. "It sounds like Gato didn't order it. Instead Matsuri decided to try and kill you and went to Gato for permission."

"Which he gave her," Naruto grumbled.

Shikamaru nodded. "Right, my guess is Gato isn't sure whether to honor the contract or not. If he sees a good opportunity to kill us he just may take it to avoid paying us. On the other hand he may be too scared of us to try it and he might think it's safer to pay us off."

"If he tries to break our contract we'll kill him." The other two nodded. "All right let's get some sleep." Naruto created another shadow clone to act as a guard as he slept. There was already one in each of his friends' rooms.

Unlike some lords Naruto did not take security lightly.

It always is

Naruto smiled and took the starting position for Crane style. "Ready to get your ass kicked Neji?"

Neji took on one of his amused smirks as he activated his blood line and slipped into a jyuken stance. "For the good of our village I will try not to injure you Kage-sama."

From a safe distance Shikamaru was lying in the shade of the castle's outer wall. "You know you two are drawing an awful lot of attention."

That was certainly true. Most of Gato's other ninja were out in the court yard watching. They gave them a very wide berth, as if afraid they might get swept up in the fighting that was about to commence. Not only ninja but many of the guards who were supposedly on duty, and soldiers who were supposed to be drilling had also gathered round.

Naruto shrugged. "If they want to watch they're welcomed to."

Neji nodded while remaining in his slightly stooped pose. "It is our duty as ninja not only to perform missions but to train to keep our skills sharp in between missions." He frowned over at Shikamaru's direction. "You should be sparring as well."

"Too troublesome." Shikamaru yawned and tried to take a nap.

Naruto chuckled. "Leave him alone Neji, otherwise he'll be complaining even more than usual. You ready?"

Neji gave a curt nod. "Ready."

"Let's go then." Naruto launched himself forward. He aimed a punch at Neji's head which seemed to leave him wide open.

Neji frowned; he blocked the punch with his left as he rolled to his right, deliberately **not** taking advantage of the opening. He and Naruto had sparred together many times and were closely matched. Naruto had blinding speed and great strength (without resorting to any ninjutsu.) Neji had great skill with his unique fighting style, powerful defense, and the patience to find real openings when Naruto got too aggressive, which he usually did. The two of them were quickly lost to everything but their own personal battle.

For the two of them it was simply a normal spar like a hundred others.

To the people who were watching it was anything but normal. Ordinary soldiers and ninja alike marveled at the sheer speed and skill of the battle they were watching. It was impressive, and more than a little frightening. Even without using jutsus they moved at an inhuman pace, almost too fast for the eye to see. For the other ninjas it was a humbling sight and did more than anything else to remind them exactly how wide the gap was between them these three visitors.

As Shikamaru rested with his eyes closed he was not quite as relaxed as he seemed. He brought his hands together and made an, 'O' with them as he considered their situation.

They had been in Gato's employ for all of two weeks now. He had to at least give Gato credit for one thing. Having been given a unique resource he had not been slow in using it. The three of them had assassinated over thirty targets, all of them either the leaders or military commanders of the neighboring villages and towns. It had been a very astute move; it not only destroyed the enemy leadership but spread terror among the ranks. Everywhere the rumors spread about the ninjas who could kill a lord sleeping in his bed and then disappear into thin air.

And once the opposition had been softened up Gato had sent out his army. Twenty thousand men had not been much back in the old

days. (The army of Konoha had possessed over a million armed men and two thousand ninja.) But now when most armies numbered in the hundreds it was a massive force. The battles had all been routs. That was when there even was a battle, usually the enemy surrendered on sight. Afterwards...

The three of them were watching as the population of a tiny village was being forced from their homes and gathered by the road. Soldiers were going through and lighting the few dozen huts on fire. There had been no battle; the people had given up without any sort of resistance.

"What the hell is going on here?" Naruto had demanded of Shimizu.

Shimizu was acting as general rather than his usual role as captain of the bodyguard. "We're separating the healthy men from the old, the women, and the children."

"But why?" Naruto wanted to know. "They didn't try and fight. Why are you treating them like prisoners?"

Shimizu frowned; he didn't like having to explain orders. "It is the will of the emperor. All able bodied men are to be assigned as labor for the gold and iron mines. Working the mines wears men out pretty quick and the emperor wants those mines producing no matter what." He sent Naruto a nasty little smile. "How else do you think the emperor can get all that gold he's paying you?"

The thought of these poor men being dragged from their homes so they could be worked to death digging for iron or gold sickened him, but Naruto didn't let it show. "And what about the others? You're burning their village down so you obviously aren't going to leave them in peace."

"These people are farmers. We'll be taking them back to Wave. The emperor has lands there that they can work."

Naruto stared at the man. "Why move them all the way there when they have their own farms right here?"

"Because they'll be a lot easier to watch and control." Shimizu snapped back. "The emperor wants these people to work and work hard and he doesn't want any of them sneaking off if they don't like it."

Naruto turned away understanding exactly what that meant. Down on the road he could hear women and children screaming as their husbands and fathers were being led away in chains. He could find only one tiny bright spot; at least these people would be allowed to live. He saw Matsuri was not too far away, she was also looking at the scene.

"Proud of yourself?" Naruto deliberately sounded light hearted as he approached her.

"What was that?" Matsuri snapped.

Naruto nodded to where chains were being put on the men while their families were being herded away. "I asked if you were proud of what you helped bring about today. You've just turned these people into slaves. And now families are being torn apart while their homes are burning to the ground. So aren't you proud?"

She glared at him. "This is the emperor's will."

Naruto smiled, "I guess that means you're just following orders then."

To Matsuri's credit she at least had the decency to look ashamed. She broke eye contact and looked at the ground. "This is different." She muttered.

"It always is when *you're* the one getting the orders." With that Naruto walked away.

It had been like that everywhere the army had gone. The population would be rounded up. The healthy men would be separated out. The soldiers would loot whatever they could and then burn everything down. The countryside was slowly being emptied so as to provide people to work in the emperor's mines and estates.

And we're helping the process along. We're even profiting from it. Shikamaru frowned and wondered if so long living in the village of Minato had softened him. He had not been an active duty ninja for very long before the Night of Fire. But he had seen enough then and later acting as a mercenary with Ino and Chouji to understand how ugly war could be. Maybe he really had gotten soft to allow what was happening now to bother him as much as it did.

Then again Naruto had been in Wind country for the last months and he had served through the entire campaign in Lightning. Naruto had seen a lot more war than he had and seemed to be more upset. But what was the alternative? Break the contract and go home without the gold? Break the contract and empty the treasury, maybe killing Gato along the way?

Shikamaru shook his head a bit. They weren't going to break contract so long as their employer kept his end of the bargain. And what Gato did to the people he conquered was no part of the contract. Having already served half a month they could not simply return home empty handed. For good or for ill they were bringing gold back with them when they returned.

There was simply no way out of the situation without breaking the contract, which they would not do. *I guess I'm not such a genius after all.*

Having closed down nine chakra points along the arm and shoulder, Neji was finally able to sneak in and land a four hit combo that left Naruto's left arm hanging completely limp. Neji smiled and leapt back.

"The fight is over Naruto-sama, do you concede?"

With a rye grin Naruto nodded. "If this were a real fight I'd keep going."

Neji approached and reconnected his chakra points. "If this had been real I would have used my 64 palms technique as well as my rotation defense."

Naruto laughed. "So what? If this had been real you would have been facing about 500 clones and I would have used Hiraishin."

All around hem there was applause. Naruto shook his head. "Imagine what they would do if we used a few jutsus."

Neji actually frowned as he found the reaction unseemly, at least coming from fellow ninjas. "I am sure they would be quite amazed Kage -sama, considering how few of them know anything at all."

Naruto nodded sadly. Only a few of them could even so much as henge. **None** of them knew how to climb trees or water walk. A few did know some jutsus, but that knowledge was zealously guarded. At the very least all of them should have known how to henge, but those who knew did not seem keen on sharing.

As Naruto and Neji talked one of Gato's ninja slowly approached them. She was a girl in her late teens or early twenties with light blonde hair. She was a bit heavy but rather cute.

"Uhm, pardon me." She said nervously.

"Yes?" Naruto responded.

The girl gave him a deep and respectful bow. "I am Kanaria, of what was once Grass country. I happen to be a friend of Matsuri's."

Naruto nodded politely. "And how can I help you Kanaria?"

She hesitated, the last thing she wanted to do was offend him.
"Matsuri told me you offered to teach her a jutsu called,
'substitution?'"

"I did," Naruto answered. "Has she changed her mind about learning it?" Despite her attempt on his life he was still willing to teach her.

"No, she still refuses to accept any help from you."

Naruto was not surprised; the girl had been avoiding him as though he were a shinigami. "Then..." He paused to give her the opportunity to tell him what she wanted.

Kanaria took a deep breath. "Would you teach it to me?"

Naruto blinked in surprise. Up until now Gato's ninja had kept a respectful distance and only spoken to him when it was their duty or in response to a question from him. Certainly no one had come up to him to ask for instruction before.

Naruto looked at the girl considering. "You're good friends with Matsuri?"

She nodded nervously. "That's right; I hope you don't hold that against me."

Naruto grinned. "Not at all, I'll teach you substitution jutsu on one condition. You have to teach it to anyone who asks you to."

"Does that include Matsuri?"

"Oh yes, but if she asks I want you to tell her I said you were **not** to help her and that I would be very upset if you did."

Kanaria gave him a rather confused look. "But you really don't mind if I teach her?"

Naruto nodded. "That's right, now if you like I'll begin. The first thing you need to know is..."

When the other ninja saw Naruto instructing Kanaria they slowly came over to see what was happening. When they realized the Second Flash was teaching her a jutsu they all asked if they could also receive instruction. In short order fifteen ninja were packed in around Naruto and hanging on his every word and movement.

Neji had no interest in joining in and had gone to stand near Shikamaru. "Naruto-sama really is too soft. He's training people who don't belong to our village."

Shikamaru opened a single eye and grinned. "Well not yet, but what do you care to bet that by the end of the week they're calling him Naruto-sensei? How would you like to head home with a fortune in gold *and* a dozen or so new recruits?"

That thought had not crossed Neji's mind. The small crowd in front of Naruto suddenly took on a very different appearance. Neji actually smiled.

From a small window high above the courtyard emperor Gato looked down at the same scene.

He did not smile.

One way or another

Author's Notes: This brings an end to this story. I may write another one in this setting at some point in the future. Or I may not. I hope those of you have read this have enjoyed it.

Matsuri ran through some hand signs. In a puff of smoke she was gone, hunk of wood taking her place.

Kanaria nodded her head approvingly. "I'd say you've got it down."

Matsuri jumped down from the tree limb she'd teleported to. "Thanks to you. I know you might have gotten in trouble for teaching this to me, I really appreciate it."

Kanaria just shook her head. "You know you could have just learned it from Naruto-sensei, like me and the others did."

"No," she said frostily. "I won't take any help from him. To be honest I don't know how you can. You're from Grass, he actually served there. Grass didn't suffer the way Wind did but it was still harsh. How can you stand to be near him, let alone learn from him or call him, 'sensei?'"

"It was a long time ago." Kanaria answered. "And what happened then was the fault of Orochimaru and Konoha. He was just a soldier obeying orders, like us."

"We're nothing like him!" Matsuri insisted loudly.

"Are you sure?" Kanari asked. "We burn down villages and turn innocent people into slaves. That isn't too different to what happened in Grass country."

"We've never massacred innocent people!"

Kanaria looked at her coldly. "Haven't we?"

Three Years Ago

The trouble makers had been arrested and beaten, and now finally they would be made examples of. They had been going about trying to stir up trouble, leaving treasonous pamphlets, spray painting graffiti with dangerous messages. They had been trying to stir up opposition to the emperor's authority. Now they would pay the price. And the entire village had been forced to come out and bear witness.

There were a total of ten criminals that would be executed. Wanting a big show Gato had decided to have them all executed at once. And each one would be killed by one of his fearsome ninja.

Matsuri had felt honored to be chosen to execute their ring leader. Her best friend Kanaria was also one of the executioners. The prisoners were all tied to wooden posts. Their arms had already been hacked off. The others were all screaming for mercy or crying and pleading. Their leader at least faced his death with some courage.

He was about her age, just a teenager. A local boy whose father had been a fisherman. His name was Inari.

"I won't beg," he said as he was tied to the post.

Matsuri had shrugged. "I don't care if you beg or not. You're just getting what you deserve for opposing the emperor."

"Emperor?" the boy had mocked. "He's nothing but a rich thug." Maybe the boy was brave. Maybe he was stupid or light headed from blood loss. Or maybe he understood he had nothing more to lose.

Matsuri slapped him across the face. "Shut up! The Emperor is a great man!"

The boy had just looked at her and spoken in a calm voice. "That's what they used to say about Orochimaru too." Matsuri had flinched at that. "He killed my dad for trying to stand up to him when he began taking everything and leaving this whole country in poverty. He killed my granddad for trying to build the bridge that could have given the people a chance to get back on their feet. He's no emperor; he's just a killer and a thief."

"Shut your damn mouth," she hissed at him. "He gave me a place and a reason to exist. I have a home now because of him. He is a great man."

Despite his situation the boy had actually smiled then. "You really do believe that don't you? Do you think you're special to him? Do you imagine he has some sort of loyalty to you? You're just a tool like everyone else. He'll use you and then throw you away the second he has no use for you."

"Liar, the emperor would never do that to those who are loyal to him."

"He does it to everyone, and he'll do it to you to eventually."

When the order had finally come she'd actually been relieved to kill him.

"That was completely different!" Matsuri insisted. "They were rebels!"

"They were kids spray painting walls and handing out leaflets." Kanaria replied. "They didn't deserve what happened to them. Just like all those people who we forced from their homes didn't deserve that."

"It's not the same! The emperor has never asked us to slaughter whole villages and cities!"

Her friend looked at her knowingly. "If he did what would you do?"

Matsuri shook her head violently. "He would *never* do that!"

"But if he did?"

"Don't ask me that!" She shot back. "What we're doing is different! We're fighting for the emperor's dream to bring peace and unity back to this world."

"Orochimaru had the same dream." Kanaria pointed out. The hard look her friend gave her made her sigh. "Look Matsuri, there's something you should know. I'm leaving; I've had enough of this."

"Leaving?" Matsuri was stunned. They'd known one another for years and had joined the emperor's service together. She was the closest thing that Matsuri had left to family.

"That's right," Kanaria said firmly. "Maybe you can fool yourself into thinking there is some sort of nobility to all of this, but I can't anymore."

"But where will you go? You don't have any family, you don't have a home."

"I've decided to go to the village of Minato and try to start over. Naruto-sensei has extended an open invitation to anyone who wants to go there."

"You'd betray the emperor?"

"Betray?" Kanaria gave her best friend a hard look. "We weren't born into his service, we came here and signed on as mercenaries, or have you forgotten that? This was never a life long commitment. I joined up by choice and now I'm leaving by choice."

Matsuri looked pleadingly at her friend. "But what about me?"

"I'm sorry, but you won't come with me and I can't stay."

"You sent for me emperor Gato?" Naruto gave his client a respectful bow.

The man sent him a greasy smile and nodded. "Yes I have, tell me Naruto how have you enjoyed working for me?"

"Well you have certainly kept us busy." He was careful to sound neutral. "As I trust you are satisfied with our services I expect to receive our first month's payment tomorrow."

"Well of course," Gato replied smoothly. "There is certainly no denying you earned it. But I have a job for you and your men. There were some rebels that have been giving me trouble and I've recently learned the location of their hidden base. I want the three of you to go there and dispose of them."

"Rebels? I haven't heard about any rebels."

"I've tried to keep their activities quiet." Gato handed over a folder with the information. "I'd like you and your men to take care of this immediately."

Naruto took the information and gave it a quick look. He was rather surprised to note the rebel base was only about ten miles away. "I'll take care of this myself; I don't need to bother my friends with it."

Gato frowned. "I want all three of you to take care of this, I insist. This is very important and I want no mistakes."

Naruto gave the man a cold and calculating look. "I understand." He turned to leave but stopped as he opened the door. "Emperor-san, I think you should know something."

"Yes?" Naruto gave him a look that made the man very nervous.

"You will pay us what you owe us, in one way or another." With that Naruto left.

Meeting with his friends Naruto handed them the folder and quickly explained what the mission was. The three veteran ninja shared a look.

"Troublesome," Shikamaru muttered

"But not wholly unexpected," Neji added.

Naruto shook his head wearily. "Come on, let's go and get this over with."

Ten miles away the three ninja came to the spot marked on the map. It was a small abandoned mine. With no hesitation the three of them entered.

Well hidden a few hundred yards away were two men. One had a pair of binoculars, while the other stood nervously over a large switch.

"Well?" The second man asked nervously.

"Relax," the man with the binoculars told him. "We have to give them a few minutes to get deeper into the mine." He allowed three minutes to pass, and then nodded his head. "Do it."

The other man pressed down on the switch.

The earth shook with a thundering crash. They could both see the huge cloud of dust rising from the hill side. The entire mine entrance and the whole hill side was gone. The hundred pounds of explosives had done the job.

The man with the binoculars nodded, happy with the result. "The emperor will be pleased."

"What's going on?" Matsuri asked one of the other ninja.

He shrugged. "I don't know, the emperor ordered us to assemble in the courtyard."

There was a sense of unease as she and the others left their quarters and went outside. The sudden assembly was unexpected, and the unexpected was rarely welcomed. As the ninja gathered Matsuri noted that all of them except Kanaria and Shimizu were present. Soon after some of the soldiers came out to assemble as well.

Or so she thought until they formed a huge square around them and took their swords out. The ninja quickly took their own weapons out, but as more and more soldiers joined the ranks around them it became clear they were doomed.

"What are you doing?!" Matsuri shouted at the men. "We're all on the same side!"

"Not anymore."

All eyes turned to the platform that overlooked the courtyard. On it the emperor had just made an appearance along with Shimizu and a tied up Kanaria.

"Emperor Gato!" Matsuri cried out. "What are you doing? We are your loyal servants!"

"I suppose some of you still are," Gato said dismissively. "Though I'm sure some of you plan on betraying me like this slut here." He nodded to Kanaria. "I think I should let you all know I've decided to do some downsizing. I need to cut my costs, and since you ninja are paid in gold I've decided to get rid of you except for Shimizu."

Matsuri stared up at the man she had served faithfully for years. The man she'd fought and killed for. The man she had given her complete and total faith to. "You can't mean that," she said dully. "You can't really mean to kill us just to avoid paying us."

Then he smiled, the cruel smile she'd seen often before, just never directed at her. "It's just good business. Human life is cheap, gold is precious. Besides you weak ninja aren't worth it, you're not that much tougher than regular soldiers and your way too expensive." He chuckled. "And the ninja that are worth it? Well they're *really* too expensive."

"Naruto-sensei will make you pay!" One of the ninja shouted.

That drew a large laugh. "I doubt that, he and his two men are already dead." His laughter was harsh and choppy. "Did any of you really think I would ever hand over so much gold?"

"You mean you were always going to betray them?" Matsuri asked.

Gato nodded. "As soon as I realized who they were I knew they were too dangerous, and too expensive, to keep around. But it worked out just fine. I got a lot of good service from them and it didn't cost me a thing. That really is the best sort of business."

Matsuri was surprised to actually feel sorry that Naruto was dead. She had wanted to kill him, and yet now that he was gone she regretted it. She wondered how that could be. She thought that perhaps, despite who he was, she had come to respect him. In the end Naruto had proven an honorable man.

Unlike the man she had chosen to serve.

Gato nodded to his captains. "Well then, let's start the killing."

With those words the slaughter began.

But it wasn't the ninja who were slaughtered. The soldiers began to screaming as their throats were sliced open. Amid a series of yellow flashes hundred of armed men began going down like wheat before a scythe. Seeing their comrades being massacred right in front of them the rest dropped their swords and ran away screaming.

With that a familiar figure appeared in front of all of them. He calmly took out a rag and began wiping the blood from his kunai and hands.

"You know, for someone who supposedly spent so much time in Konoha you have no idea what a real ninja is." Naruto sounded quite calm and relaxed. One would never guess from listening to him that he had just killed a few hundred men. He looked up at Gato with a look of contempt. "Did you really think we would fall for such an obvious trap? Do you even have any idea how many battles and ambushes I've survived?"

Gato stared down at the man and felt the blood draining from his face. "But... but... you were blown up!"

"Shadow clones idiot." Naruto said disdainfully.

Shikamaru and Neji appeared on the platform. Shika performed a quick jutsu and Gato and Shimizu were held in place.

"We suspected from the very start that you were likely to betray us." Shikamaru said.

"One does not expect honor from a man who is a thief and a coward." Neji said. He promptly cut Shimizu's throat while freeing Kanaria.

With a flash of yellow Naruto appeared on the platform towering over Gato with his kunai in hand. "I told you that you would pay us in one way or another."

"Wait! Just wait! Don't do anything hasty! We can work out a deal! I have a fortune in gold and jewels, let me live and it's all yours!"

"Believe it or not Gato, we aren't thieves and we didn't come here to rob you. We came here to fulfill a contract. You owe us 700 pieces of gold for services rendered."

"And for your betrayal you owe us your life." Neji added.

Naruto nodded. "And that's what we'll take, no more and no less."

"Naruto please stop!"

Naruto turned to see Matsuri climbing the steps of the platform.

Gato felt some hope. "Matsuri, I knew I could count on you!"

Matsuri came to a halt in front of Naruto. "Please, I beg you not to kill him." Gato smiled while Naruto looked amazed. "Please let me be the one to kill him."

"What?" Gato looked at her in horror. "How can you betray me?"

Matsuri gave him a look of smoky hate. "It's easy since you were about to do that to me."

Naruto stepped aside. "Be my guest."

Naruto would have made it quick and clean; he was a professional and always killed like one. Matsuri was neither quick nor clean. She had trusted him, given him everything, only to be told she was less important than a few shiny coins. She had some frustrations to take out.

It was twenty minutes before he finally died.

It was almost an hour before she finally stopped.

In the treasury vault they had counted out seven hundred pieces of gold.

"All right, we're done here." Naruto said.

"That's it? You're just leaving now?" Matsuri asked.

"You and the others are welcome to come with us." Naruto said.

"But what about the people here?"

Naruto looked at her. "What about them? They aren't my responsibility."

She crossed her arms. "If you just leave this entire place will fall into chaos. Someone needs to be in charge of putting things back in some sort of order."

"You know Naruto; we could add a lot of territory and people to our village." Shikamaru pointed out.

Neji nodded. "It would greatly strengthen the village. And the people here would finally have a government that wasn't bent on just stealing from them."

Naruto saw all the eyes turn in his direction.

"You think we should take over?" As one they nodded. He sighed; this was going to be troublesome.

THE END